

What's Done, is Done: Descartes On Resoluteness and Regret

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Published online: 27 July 2013

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Abstract

In René Descartes' correspondence with Elizabeth (mainly 1645-1647) as well as his *Passions of the Soul* (1649), Descartes says that regret is appropriate only when agents act irresolutely, regardless of whether or not their actions bring about good states-of-affairs. In this paper I set out to explain what Descartes views as a novel account of virtue: that being virtuous amounts to being resolute. I show how this account of virtue fits into Descartes' larger world-view, and then examine his belief that a person should not regret resolute misdeeds.

Lady Macbeth:

How now, my lord, why do you keep alone,
Of sorriest fancies your companions making,
Using those thoughts which should indeed have died
With them they think on? Things without all remedy
Should be without regard: what's done, is done.
Shakespeare, *Macbeth* Act 4, scene 2

Lady Macbeth:

What's done cannot be undone.
Shakespeare, *Macbeth* Act 5, scene 1

§1 Introduction

Doubt is the hallmark of Descartes' philosophy. It is then surprising¹ to find that resoluteness is a—perhaps *the*—Cartesian² virtue: “Virtue, I believe, consists precisely in sticking firmly to this resolution [to carry out whatever reason recommends without being

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diverted by... passions or appetites]; though I do not know that anyone has ever so described it..." (CSMK III 258; AT IV 265).³ Then Descartes issues the following claim: "...if we always do whatever reason tells us, *even if events show us afterwards that we have gone wrong*, we will never have grounds for repentance, because it was not our fault" (CSMK III 258; AT IV 266). (Emphasis added). He further suggests that the only thing we should ever regret or repent is lacking resolve. "[N]othing causes regret (*les regrets*) and repentance⁴ (*les repentirs*) except irresolution (*irrésolution*)" (CSMK III 267; AT IV 295).

Cartesian resoluteness requires that an agent act according to the dictates of reason, which involves fully embracing the freedom of the will without being unduly influenced by the passions. In cases in which agents are resolute, yet their actions bring about unintended bad consequences, then even though these bad states-of-affairs were caused by the agents' action (or inaction), they should not experience regret or repentance. Regret and repentance are reserved exclusively for agents who act irresolutely, that is, who fail to act according to the recommendations of reason. Descartes says that even those agents who act irresolutely, but bring about good consequences should regret their irresoluteness. "There would be more ground for repentance (*se repentir*) if we had acted against our conscience, even though we realized afterwards that we had done better than we thought" (CSMK III 269; AT IV 307). Descartes' view that regret is appropriate only when agents act irresolutely, regardless of whether or not their actions bring about good states-of-affairs may appear to be counterintuitive.⁵ I examine Descartes' novel account of virtue.⁶ I show how his view of virtue-as-resoluteness fits into his larger world-view, and therein is not counterintuitive.

We shall come to see that Descartes does not think highly of those who cannot make up their own minds, who are too easily influenced by the advice of others, or are plagued by excessive self-doubt and indecision, for they lack confidence in their ability to judge well. Nor does he admire the wishy-washy, or those who flip-flop, dither, or dawdle; for they lack the kind of confidence that is necessary to be willing to act on their own best judgments. Even if he does not readily perceive these virtues in himself,⁷ Descartes admires decisiveness, constancy, dispatch, those who "stick to their guns," even to the point of bringing themselves harm.

§2 Regret, Repentance, and Remorse

Descartes says that there are six primitive passions: wonder, love, hatred, desire, joy, and sadness, and all other passions originate from them (CSM I 353; AT XI 380). Repentance (*du repentir*), which is directly opposed to self-satisfaction, is a kind of sadness that is felt when we are certain that we have done some evil deed (CSM I 396; AT XI 464 and CSM I

392; AT VI 464). On the other hand, remorse (*du remord*) is “a kind of sadness which results from our doubting that something we are doing, or have done, is good” (CSM I 392; AT XI 464). “Remorse of conscience” comes about when we decide upon some present or past course of action before irresolution has ceased (CSM I 351; AT XI 376). “An imperfection deserving of pity” is that “it often happens that weak-spirited people repent of deeds they have done without knowing for certain that they are evil; they are convinced of this simply because they fear it is so, and if they had done the opposite, they would repent in the same way” (CSM I 396-7; AT XI 472-3). The function of remorse is to make us inquire into whether or not the object of our doubt is well-placed, and also to prevent us from repeating actions that we are not certain of as good (CSM I 392-3; AT XI 464). Likewise, when we repent that which we know for certain is “truly evil” such repentance is very useful in that it “prompts us to do better on another occasion” (CSM I 396; AT VI 472).⁸

Regret is also characterized as a kind of sadness. Whereas both repentance and remorse involve agency and pertain to the choices we make relevant to our desires to pursue good and avoid evil, regret is accompanied by a “particular bitterness in that it is always joined to some despair and to the memory of a pleasure that gave us joy. For we regret only the good things which we once enjoyed and which are so completely lost that we have no hope of recovering them at the time and in the form in which we regret them” (CSM I 402; AT XI 485). Descartes would not experience regret over the loss of something unpleasant or miserable, such as the feeling of intense grief he experienced at losing his mother at a very young age. Descartes may well regret the loss of his mother, but he would not regret the intense sadness that this loss brought about.⁹ Regret is broadly construed to include people, places, and events that are morally neutral, e.g., regretting the loss of the solitude and tranquility Descartes enjoyed while living in retreat in the Netherlands. Hence regret extends to anything that is good or pleasant but no longer attainable, which may or may not include states-of-affairs caused by voluntary, involuntary or non-voluntary agency.¹⁰

I limit regret (and repentance and remorse) to states-of-affairs caused by agents, and to the extent that these passions refer to sadness that is felt over actions, I consider mainly in agent-regret.¹¹ Descartes distinguishes remorse from repentance in terms of degrees of certainty concerning the evil nature of the act in question, and whether or not this action is on-going or already completed. Agents experience *remorse* over present or past actions that may or may not be good, whereas agents experience *repentance* over past deeds that they are certain of as evil. Although Descartes distinguishes regret (*le regret*), repentance (*le repentir*), and remorse (*le remords*) in the *Passions*, he most often uses the terms regret and repentance, and uses these terms interchangeably.

Regret and repentance (and remorse) are undesirable because they hinder contentment: “nothing can impede our contentment except desire¹² and regret (*le regret*) or repentance (*le repentir*)” (CSMK III 258; AT IV 266). Repentance is “the most bitter” of all the passions” (CSM I 351-2; AT XI 377), because its cause “lies in ourselves alone” (CSM I 396; AT XI 472). Both remorse and repentance “presuppose evil,” thus we would be better off to never feel these passions [and the related passion of regret] in the first place. We can avoid feeling these passions if we habituate ourselves towards acting with resolve (CSM I 393; AT VI 464).

§3 Irresoluteness and Resoluteness

Irresolution is a kind of anxiety that “keeps the soul balanced, as it were, between several actions open to it, irresolution causes it not to perform any of them, and thus gives it time to make a choice before committing itself. In this respect it has a beneficial function” (CSM I 390; AT XI 459). When we think of some “expected outcome” as dependant on us, we sometimes experience difficulty in deciding upon the proper means for bringing about the desired outcome, as well as how to put it into effect (CSM I 351; AT XI 376). In other words, there is a difference between the difficulty of deciding what to do in the first place, and the difficulty of being able to act on a decision once it has been made. In the *Passions* (Article 59), it is the first kind of difficulty—determining what to do or avoid doing—that gives rise to irresolution. The second kind of difficulty—putting a decision into effect—is opposed by courage or boldness, the opposite of which are, respectively, timidity and fear or terror (CSM I 351; AT XI 375-6).

Irresolution can be beneficial because it gives us time to make a choice before committing ourselves to a course of action (CSM I 390; AT XI 459-60); that is, it “makes us disposed to deliberate and take advice” (CSM I 351; AT XI 375-6). But when this irresolution lasts longer than it should, namely when we “spend in deliberation the time required for action,” then irresolution is “extremely bad” (CSM I 390; AT XI 459). What is very common in some people is an “excess of irresolution” that is felt even when “they have no need to make a choice and they see only one thing to be taken or left, the anxiety often holds them back and makes them pause to search in vain for something else” (CSM I 390-1; AT XI 460). Excessively irresolute agents experience anxiety over choosing wrongly, at times even when there is no need to make a decision; such “excess of irresolution results from too great a desire to do well and from a weakness of the intellect, which contains only a lot of confused notions, and none that are clear and distinct” (CSM I 390-1; AT XI 460).

Fortunately there is a two-step program in place to remedy the excessive irresolution that renders some agents inert, which reflects the influence of the Scholastic (and earlier Hellenic) view that virtue is habit (*habitude*, from the Latin *habitus*).¹³ First, agents must “become accustomed to form certain and determinate judgments regarding everything that comes before [them]” (CSM I 390-1; AT XI 459-60). Second, agents must “believe that we always do our duty when we *do* what we judge to be best, even though our judgment may perhaps be a very bad one” (CSM I 390-1; AT XI 459-60). (Emphasis added.)

Even in cases in which agents are quite uncertain about what to do, as for example when they are engaged in methodological doubt, they should act *as if* they are certain. The second maxim of Descartes’ provisional morality of the *Discourse* advises: to be “as firm (*plus ferm*) and decisive (*plus résolu*) in my actions as I could, and to follow even the most doubtful opinions...with no less constancy than if they had been quite certain” (CSM I, 123; AT VI 24). Descartes illustrates this advice with the story of a lost traveler. Instead of wandering back and forth, or resting in one place, he should walk as straight as he can in the same direction, never changing his course for any reason: “for in this way, even if he does not go exactly where he wishes, he will at least end up in a place where he is likely to be better off than in the middle of the forest” (CSM I, 123; AT VI 24). The predicament the traveler finds himself in is analogous to “everyday life” which often forces us to act “without delay” even when we are not sure what we should do.

[I]t is a most certain truth that when it is not within our power to discern the truest opinions, we must follow the most probable. Even when no opinion appears more probable than any others, we must still adopt some; and having done so we must regard them not as doubtful, from a practical point of view, but as most true and certain...By following this maxim I could free myself from all the regrets¹⁴ (*les repentirs*) and remorse (*les remords*) which usually trouble the consciences of those weak and faltering spirits who allow themselves to set out on some supposedly good course of action which later, in their inconstancy, they judge to be bad (CSM I 123; AT VI 25).

In the *Principles* I (Article 3) Descartes counsels against applying methodological doubt to ordinary life and again he suggests that we often have to act on what is “merely probable.”

As far as ordinary life is concerned, the chance for action would frequently pass us by if we waited until we could free ourselves from our doubts, and as we are often compelled to accept what is merely probable. From time to time we may even have

to make a choice between two alternatives, even though it is not apparent that one of the two is more probable than the other (CSM I, 193; AT VIIIA 5).

It is clear that excessive irresoluteness as a vice.¹⁵ Yet ordinary life often presents us with situations in which we do not have time to discern the most true or certain path to follow. Unlike when we are engaged in the search for truth, we cannot always see clearly and distinctly what we should or should not do. In these cases when we are not sure what to do, we must make up our minds and act on what we have discerned to be most probably true. Because certainty cannot be obtained, what matters is the extent to which we are resolute. Agents must follow these probable opinions with conviction so that they do not find themselves in the regrettable situation of the weak-spirited who, inconstant or irresolute, wander around in circles like an aimless, befuddled traveler.¹⁶

In a letter to Elizabeth, Descartes reiterates the point that when in doubt agents must embrace probable opinions. Here, as in earlier cited passages, Descartes emphasizes that the cause of regret and repentance is irresoluteness.

[O]ne must also minutely examine all the customs of one's place of abode to see how far they should be followed. Though we cannot have certain demonstrations of everything, still we must take sides, and in matters of custom embrace the opinions that seem the most probable, *so that we may never be irresolute when we need to act. For nothing causes regret and remorse except irresolution* (CSMK III 267; AT IV 295). (Emphasis added.)

Descartes' account of irresoluteness seems fairly straightforward. Sometimes we are presented with several alternatives for acting and find ourselves uncertain about what to do. Feeling some degree of anxiety about what we should or should not do can be beneficial because it slows us down, giving us time to deliberate and maybe even to seek advice from others. Generally speaking, slow and careful deliberation is a good thing, especially when the stakes are high. But we do not want to slow ourselves down to the point of inaction. It may be the case that we decide to do nothing, but this would be different from inaction caused by indecision, which Descartes views as extremely bad. For example, Descartes' decision to suppress publication of his work *Le Monde* must have caused him some anxiety. Such a difficult decision requires time for deliberation and perhaps consulting the advice of trustworthy friends. But as long as this deliberation eventually results in a decision about what to do, Descartes' irresolution and uncertainty is beneficial to the decision-making process. All things being equal, taking time to deliberate would presumably result in a better decision than a rush to judgment.

But then Descartes seems to change his mind. In a letter to Elizabeth (May 1646), he confesses to a “glaring mistake” in his treatise on the passions.

I admit indeed that we are quite right to take time to deliberate before undertaking tasks of any importance. But once a project is begun and we are agreed upon the main aims, I do not see that we have anything to gain by delaying matters in arguing about details. For if the project succeeds despite this, then all the minor benefits we may have gained in this way are entirely offset by the harmful effects of the disgust that such delays ordinarily cause. And if it does not succeed, then all this does is to show the world that we had plans which failed. In addition, when we delay undertaking a project, it often happens – more often in the case of good projects than in the case of bad ones – that the opportunity is lost. This is why I am convinced that *resolution (la résolution) and dispatch (la promptitude) are virtues which are very necessary for projects already begun* (CSMK III 288; AT IV 414-415). (Emphasis added.)

Earlier in this same letter Descartes explains that his change of heart came about as the result of a fault he recognized in his own character. “In order to palliate my own diffidence, I doubted as one of the emotions of the soul which are excusable a sort of irresolution which sometimes prevents us from performing actions that have been approved by our judgment” (CSMK III 288; AT IV 414-415).¹⁷

Perhaps Descartes is too hard on himself. Instead of it being a “glaring mistake,” Descartes simply decides, upon reflection, to amend his account of irresoluteness. In the *Passions*, he describes irresolution as a kind of anxiety that is felt when we are not certain about what course of action to follow; for example, Descartes being uncertain about whether or not to publish his treatise. It is beneficial to feel some anxiety in making a decision because it can give us time to deliberate or seek advice, which would then likely result in a better decision. At the same time Descartes admonishes excessive irresolution because it might render an agent inert. In the letters to Elizabeth (written around the same time he was working on the *Passions*), he adds that resolve is also necessary once a particular action (or set of actions) has begun. Here Descartes advises against re-thinking a decision once it has been made, or arguing over the details of how it should be carried out, because such lack of resolve will not necessarily influence the success or failure of the action or project in question. Instead, the “disgust” that many will feel towards such second-guessing or wrangling would likely offset any benefits that might be gained. What is the worst thing imaginable according to

Descartes is that the person in question would gain a reputation for being irresolute, as reflected in his commentary on Machiavelli's *Prince*.

He [a prince] should be immovable and inflexible. I do not mean that he should hold fast to his own first designs; he cannot have eyes everywhere and so he must ask for advice and hear many people's reasons, before coming to a decision. But once he has announced his decision, he must be inflexible in holding to it even if this does him harm; *for it can hardly be as harmful to him as the reputation of being irresolute and inconstant* (CSM III 294; AT IV 490). (Emphasis added).

Although there is a distinction between the kinds of decision-making that is ideal for leaders as opposed to those who are not in leadership positions, Descartes' model prince does display virtues that are also desirable for subjects. Regarding Descartes' decision to suppress publication of *Le Monde*, it may have served him well to take some time to think things through. But once a decision was made it would have done him little good to go back over the decision. In the words of Lady Macbeth, "What's done is done." Instead, Descartes should hold fast to his determined course of action. Descartes was criticized severely for this decision. But even if events had later shown Descartes' critics to be right, Descartes would have no grounds for repentance so long as his decision was both initiated, and subsequently carried out, with resolve.

I now give a fuller account of what Descartes means by being resolute. One type of irresoluteness pertains to the state of spending too much time in deliberation when we should have begun acting upon a deliberative judgment (as found in the cited selections from the *Passions*). In this case the virtue of resoluteness involves arriving at a decision after the appropriate amount of deliberation. Another type of irresoluteness points to the trait of second-guessing ourselves after having made a decision and having begun the related action(s) (as found in the cited selections from Letters to Elizabeth). In this case resoluteness requires sticking to a decision once it has been made, which requires that we carry on with our decision(s) even though they may cause us harm. To do otherwise would cause us greater harm for we would earn a reputation for being irresolute (Ibid).

Given Descartes' account of resoluteness, specifically in terms of being able to stick to a decision once it is made, one may wonder if it is not always a virtue but perhaps more often a vice. For it is frequently considered a character-flaw for persons to persist in their original plans in light of evidence and arguments to the contrary. We may view such agents as close-minded or irrational. History provides numerous examples of leaders (and others) who have exhibited resoluteness and refused to entertain the possibility of changing their minds, being

regarded as far from virtuous in their persistence. Instead virtue would require agents be open to changing their position if important and reliable new information or considerations comes to light. Not to do so would exhibit a sort of egocentric belief that our former selves could not possibly have been wrong.

In his commentary on the *Prince*, Descartes does suggest that being resolute requires being “inflexible” and “immovable,” which would seem to discourage open-mindedness and the possibility of changing one’s mind. But then Descartes is quick to point out the prince should not “hold fast to his own first designs” but hear from others and perhaps seek advice before arriving at a final decision. After that point, however, Descartes does not see any value in quibbling over details nor in second-guessing himself, because these behaviors would suggest a lack of confidence in his decision-making, which would be particularly undesirable for a leader. Instead, once a decision is made, resolute agents must confidently stick to their decisions, even to the point that it may cause them harm. Consider, for example, a political leader who has difficulty carrying out a decision that she knows to be unpopular among her constituents. If she is resolute, however, she will be steadfast in her decision even if it costs her votes in the next election. Thus when Descartes recommends being “inflexible” and “immovable,” he is simply pointing out that some decisions are especially hard to carry out because the agents in question risk some harm to themselves or their reputation or both, which may be a difficulty that leaders face fairly often. Especially when it is difficult, or goes against a person’s own self-interest, Cartesian virtue requires that agents must be resolute and carry on with any course of action that has already begun without being paralyzed by fear over what harm their decision(s) may cause themselves.

If we come to find out *after the fact* that we have done wrong, then we are not to experience regret or repentance as long as we acted with resolve. “I also think there is nothing to repent of when we have done what we judged best at the time when we had to act, even though later, thinking it over at our leisure, we judge that we made a mistake” (CSMK III 269; AT IV 307). But if a course of action is ongoing and reversible, and if clear evidence is presented that it is the wrong course of action, Cartesian virtue or resoluteness can accommodate a person changing his or her mind. For example, imagine that after much consideration and encouragement from a trusted friend, Descartes reluctantly agrees to serve as a philosophy tutor to the Queen of Sweden. Upon his arrival, however, Descartes is asked to write a ballet instead of teaching philosophy to the Queen. It would have been consistent with Descartes’ account of resoluteness that he should change his mind and resolutely decide to leave the Queen’s court. But he did not. Other kinds of decisions or projects may be more short-lived, for example, the time in which it takes to decide whether or not to respond sharply to a verbal criticism. While others may yield results that are

relatively inconsequential, for example, whether one should eat porridge or pickled herring for breakfast. In such situations there may be little or no opportunity to reverse a course of action, or perhaps there is no great consequence in doing so. But for others that last longer, resoluteness can allow agents to change their minds. In fact Cartesian resoluteness will *require* that agents revise a reversible course of action if they become aware of new and compelling evidence they may be wrong. As Descartes explains in the following passage, there are at least two reasons agents are required to do so. First, the world is always changing, thus agents must adjust a chosen course of action to adapt to these changes. Second, Cartesian agents must employ the Cartesian Method which involves a rigorous manner of forming certain and determinate judgments in the first place—this kind of rigor would require agents to carefully examine evidence, even if it may suggest a chosen course of action is no longer advised:

I saw nothing in the world which remained always in the same state, and for my part I was determined to make my judgments more and more perfect, rather than worse. For these reasons I thought I would be sinning against good sense if I were to take my previous approval of something as obliging me to regard it as good later on, when it had perhaps ceased to be good or I no longer regarded it as such (CSM I 123; AT VI 14).

It may be objected that that this account of resoluteness, which allows and sometimes demands that agents revise their judgments, requires individuating acts in such a fine-grained manner that resoluteness simply amounts to “Always do what you judge to be your best *at that time*.” But this is exactly Descartes’ point. Many decisions and projects take place over time, and in these cases resoluteness requires that agents be vigilant in their determination always, and at every opportunity, to exercise their very best judgment. Descartes does recognize that what is or is not the best course of action may change over time. As long as agents have a very good reason to do so, and if a course of action is reversible, they can and must change their minds and reverse or alter a course of action that is already undertaken but proven to be wrong. In other words, agents aiming at self-perfection (or virtue) must be resolute in their resoluteness.

§4 The Virtue of Self-Reliance

Descartes’ account of resoluteness in the *Passions* and letters to Elizabeth is consistent with the moral maxims that are introduced in the letter to Elizabeth (4 August 1645).¹⁸ Here Descartes suggests that “each person can make himself content without any external assistance” provided he satisfies these three conditions.

1. To always try to employ his mind as well as he can to discover what he should or should not do in all circumstances of life.
2. To have a firm and constant resolution to carry out whatever reason recommends without being diverted by his passions or appetites.
3. To bear in mind that while he guides himself as far as he can, by reason, all the good things which he does not possess are one and all entirely outside his power. In this way he will become accustomed not to desire them (CSMK III 257-8; AT IV 265-6).

Although Descartes never offers any systematic treatment of ethics or morality, these conditions come closest to Descartes' definitive morality.¹⁹ They provide an understanding of Cartesian resoluteness, which not only illuminates Descartes' novel account of virtue, but renders more intuitive Descartes' view that the only thing we need ever regret is being irresolute.

The first condition emphasizes self-discovery and self-reliance, both of which are very standard Cartesian notions. Against relying upon custom or authority, Descartes says that individuals should rely upon themselves and their God-given ability to reason to determine what they should do or avoid doing. Even if agents are wrong, it matters deeply to Descartes that they determine for themselves what they should or should not do. This mature view contrasts sharply with the provisional morality that he puts forward earlier in the *Discourse* where Descartes advises his readers to defer to custom and example. Later, Descartes emphasizes that contentedness need not derive from external conditions; thus he emphasizes the virtue of self-reliance.

Both species of irresoluteness—the inability to make up one's mind and the inability to stay the course—reflect a lack of confidence in one's decisions. In the first case, agents may be accustomed to look to others, perhaps authority figures, to make up their minds for them. Other irresolute agents may be plagued by excessive self-doubt or fear of harm that may come to themselves if they act on their decision. Instead, resoluteness requires that agents be self-reliant, that is, habituate themselves to determining for *themselves* what they should and should not do. John C. McCarthy, in his work "Descartes's Feeble Spirits" (*Weakness of Will from Plato to the Present*, Tobias Hoffmann (ed.), The Catholic University of America Press, 2008), endorses this interpretation:

It is not their [the weak's] willingness to revise their judgments from time to time, which clearly is not a disposition any philosopher could fault. [Descartes's] concern, rather, is with the agitation that marks their reconsideration, as though they lacked all confidence in their judgments...what we might call a "spirit of self-reliance" [is] the defining feature of Cartesian strength. For...he resolves never to favor any appearance of the good - present, future, or past - over his rational capacity to discern the good for himself at any given time, and so also to call what had once seemed to him good again into question (p. 184).

Recall the optimistic opening lines of Descartes' *Discourse*. "Good sense is the best distributed thing in the world... the power of judging well and of distinguishing the true from the false – which is what we properly call "good sense" or "reason" – is naturally equal in all men...For it is not enough to have a good mind; the main thing is to apply it well" (CSM I 111; AT VI 2). If every man and woman can reason for him or herself, then individuals ought to be able to decide for themselves what is right or wrong, and to proceed with confidence on those decisions. Agents with weak and faltering spirits have trouble making up their own minds, which can sometimes cause them to experience regret even when they are not sure they have done something wrong. On the other hand, resolute agents do not second-guess themselves. Nor do they dither or wrangle over how a course of action is to be carried out. Once a decision is made, these virtuous agents carry out the chosen course of action with confidence, even if a passion such as fear pulls them in another direction. For in being "as firm and decisive in my actions" as is possible, we can free ourselves "from all those regrets (*les repentirs*) and remorse (*les remords*) that usually trouble the consciences of those weak and faltering spirits who allow themselves to set out on some supposedly good course of action which later, in their inconstancy, they judge to be bad" (CSM I 123; AT VII 25).

Many people are incapable of finding the right path on their own, "yet there are few who cannot recognize it well enough when somebody else clearly points it out to them" (CSMK III 259; AT IV 272). As long as we take great care in seeking the advice of "the most able people, instead of allowing ourselves to be guided blindly by example, and we use all our mental powers to *discover* how we ought to proceed, then however things may turn out, our conscience will be at peace and we shall have the assurance that our opinions on morality are the best we could possibly have" (Ibid.). (Italics added.) For "[t]rue philosophy...teaches that even amid the saddest disasters and most bitter pains we can always be content, provided that we know how to use our reason" (CSMK III 272; AT IV 315). What matters chiefly is that it be *our* reason, and that we follow with deliberation and confidence.

The second condition of morality addresses what is the chief obstacle to being resolute, hence self-reliant. Even if agents have discovered for themselves what they should or should not be doing, their passions or appetites can divert them from their decided course of action. This underscores what is oft-times misunderstood, namely that Descartes generally views the passions as *beneficial* to us as embodied souls. In a Letter to Elizabeth (1 September 1645): “I do not think [the passions] should be altogether despised, or even that one should free oneself altogether from the passions. It is enough to subject one’s passions to reason; and once they are thus tamed they are sometimes the more useful the more they tend towards excess” (CSM III 265; AT IV 287). Passions are kinds of thoughts defined as “perceptions, sensations, or emotions of the soul...which are caused, maintained and strengthened by some movement of the spirits [in the pineal gland]” (CSM II 338; AT VI 349). While the soul “has pleasures of its own,” pleasures that are common to the soul and the body “depend entirely on the passions.” These passions are beneficial to us as embodied souls because they direct us towards what nature (created by a benevolent deity) deems to be good for us: “[T]he same agitation of the spirits which normally causes the passions also disposes the body to make movements which help us to attain these things [the things nature deems good for us]” (CSM I 349; AT XI 372). Specifically, as motivational states, the passions dispose us both (i) to desire the things that nature deems useful or beneficial to our nature, and (ii) to persist in that volition. In this manner the passions contribute to our happiness; persons “whom the passions can move most deeply are capable of enjoying the sweetest pleasures of this life” (CSM I 404; AT XI 488). Here Descartes distinguishes himself from the Stoics, for instead of suppressing the passions he views them as contributing to human flourishing. These same passions can, however, wreak havoc, which comes about “when [people] do not know how to put these passions to good use and when fortune works against them” (CSM I 404; AT XI 488). If not fortune, we can overcome our ignorance regarding the proper use of the passions. In fact the chief use of wisdom “lies in its teaching us to be masters of our passions...” (CSM I 404; AT XI 488).

Mastering the passions happens by a sort of conditioning, as with the case of a dog that runs away when hearing a violin if it was previously “whipped to the sound of music” (CSMK 201; AT I 134).²⁰ Specifically, we must pay careful attention to the fact that the passions “represent to us the goods to whose pursuit they impel us as being much greater than they really are” (CSMK III 267; AT IV 295). If we do pay careful attention, then “when we feel ourselves moved by some passions we suspend our judgment until it is calmed, and do not let ourselves easily be deceived by the false appearance of the good of this world” (CSMK III 267; AT IV 295). In other words, resolute agents can condition themselves to become aware of the influence that the passions can have over them to the extent that they

deceptively represent something as good or evil when it is not. Thus when agents feel themselves excited by some passion(s), they ought to suspend their judgment until this excitement has passed.

Descartes describes those with the “strongest souls” as naturally able to “[conquer] the passions and [can] stop the bodily movements which accompany them,” whereas those with the “weakest souls” lack the “weapons” for fighting the passions. These weapons are “firm and determinate judgments bearing upon the knowledge of good and evil” (CSM I 347; AT XI 367). But even the weakest souls can acquire absolute mastery over their passions, that is, “if we employed sufficient ingenuity in training and guiding them” (CSM I 348; AT XI 370). If dogs can be trained to run away at the sound of a violin, presumably humans can be trained to master their passions. This requires paying attention to the passions so that when we feel ourselves being moved by it we give ourselves time to calm down. In this way we will not be deceived by false appearances of what is true (or good). Thus, with firmness and conviction we can and will carry out the recommendations of reason without being unduly influenced by the passions.

The third condition of morality advises resolute agents—who are determining for themselves how they should or should not act—to align their desires towards that which is within their power to obtain. We do not desire to have more arms or more tongues, but we do desire to have “more health and more riches,” because the latter “can be acquired by our exertions, or are due to our nature” (CSM IIIK 258; AT IV 266). In fact immediately following this condition is the striking passage cited above: “For nothing can impede our contentment except desire, regret or repentance; but if we always do whatever our reason tells us, even if events show us afterwards that we have gone wrong, we will never have any ground for repentance, because it was not our own fault” (CSM IIIK 258; AT IV 266).

In the *Passions* (Article 144) Descartes explains that passions, such as joy and love, sadness and hatred, cannot lead us to perform an action “except by means of the desire they produce” (CSM I 379; AT XI 436). For this reason it is the desire that we should “take particular care to control; and here lies the chief utility of morality,” namely, to help us control our desires (CSM I 379; AT XI 436). “[D]esire is always good when it conforms to true knowledge; likewise it cannot fail to be bad when based on some error” (CSM I 379; AT XI 436). The most common mistake that is made regarding our desires is the failure to distinguish between things that depend on us and those that do not. Knowledge of the goodness of things that do depend only on us, that is, things that depend on our free will, ensures that these things are easy to desire. This is because the “pursuit of virtue consists in doing the good things that depend on us, and it is certain that we cannot have too ardent a

desire for virtue” (Ibid.). We should never “desire with passion” those things that do not depend on us no matter how good they may be because they prevent us from desiring things that are within our power: “For we can desire only what we consider in some way to be possible” (CSM I 380; AT XI 438).

We must, then, utterly reject the common opinion that there is a Fortune outside of us which causes things to happen or not to happen, just it as pleases. And we must recognize that everything is guided by divine Providence, whose eternal decree is infallible and immutable to such an extent that, except for matters it has determined to be dependent on our free will, we must consider everything that affects us to occur of necessity and as it were by fate, so that it would be wrong for us to desire things to happen in any other way” (CSM I 380; AT XI 439).

Most of our desires pertain to matters that do not depend wholly on us or on other’s free will, hence we would do well to “pick out just what depends only on us, so as to limit our desire to that alone” (Ibid.). The rest of these matters, whose outcome are “wholly fated and immutable,” should not be desired. Still we should consider reasons that make them “more or less predictable, so as to use these reasons in governing our actions” (Ibid.). Descartes again uses the image of a traveler who must choose between two different routes, one of which is usually safer than the other. Providence decrees that in following the route the traveler thinks to be safer, he will be robbed, whereas the less safe route would pose him no danger. Reason should not be indifferent to which route he chooses, but insists he follow what is usually the safer route “whether evil may befall us.”

[F]or since any such evil was inevitable from our point of view, we had no reason to which to be exempt from it; *we had reason only to do the best that our intellect was able to recognize*, as I am supposing we did. And it is certain that when we apply ourselves to distinguish Fatality from Fortune in this way, we easily acquire the habit of governing our desires so that their fulfillment depends only on us, making it possible for them always to give us complete satisfaction (CSM I 381; AT XI 440). (Emphasis added.)

This clarifies Descartes’ counterintuitive view that resolute agents should not feel sadness or regret over bringing about bad consequences or states-of-affairs: it is not their fault. The ill-fated traveler who resolutely decided to follow the path that led him to be robbed could not have been expected to do anything but choose for himself what he deemed to be the safer route. He had no way of knowing that Fate previously decreed he would be robbed. He has no grounds for regretting this course of action because whether or not he was going to

be safe was out of his control. Thus, virtuous agents should not feel regret or repentance (the opposite of self-satisfaction) when, from time to time, Fate inevitably leads them into harm's way.

Thus, in Descartes' mature view of morality, Cartesian resoluteness, or virtue, emphasizes rationality and self-reliance. It requires that agents align their desires with that which is within their control, and not allow their passions to move them away from the path they have chosen for themselves according to the dictates of reason. Of course there will be cases in which, relying on ourselves, we follow the recommendations of reason only to find out we have judged poorly. "[I]f I always saw clearly what was true and good, I should never have to deliberate about the right judgment or choice" (CSM II 40; AT VII 58). We cannot withhold our assent until we have clear and distinct perception. Instead, resolute agents must discern what is most probable (similar to the Academic Skeptics), and proceed with firmness and conviction with what they have determined for themselves to be the best course of action. In the realm of action, as distinct from the search for truth, the focus of attention is not on truth—on getting it right—but being resolute, that is, on whether or not we use our (God-given) freedom of the will correctly. Acting in this way, we avoid the sadness of regret and can obtain happiness. "[S]ince our will tends to pursue or avoid only what our intellect represents as good or bad, we need only to judge well in order to act well, and to judge as well as we can in order to do our best—that is to say, in order to acquire all the virtues and in general all the other goods we can acquire. And when we are certain of this, we cannot fail to be happy (CSM I 125; AT VI 28). In other words, virtue, which amounts to being resolute, is both necessary and sufficient for happiness:

It is...not necessary that our reason should be free from error; it is sufficient that our conscience testifies that we have never lacked resolution and virtue to carry out whatever we have judged to be the best course. So virtue by itself is sufficient to make us content in this life. But virtue unenlightened by intellect can be false; that is to say, the will and resolution to do well can carry us to evil courses, if we think them good; and in such a case the contentment which virtue brings is not solid. Moreover, such virtue is commonly set in opposition to pleasure, appetite and passion, and is accordingly very difficult to practice. The right use of reason on the other hand, by giving a true knowledge of the good, prevents virtue from being false...So we must conclude that the greatest felicity of man depends on the right use of reason (CSMK III 258; AT IV 266-7).²¹

Thus Descartes' rationale for his view of agent-regret is that "we are responsible only for our thoughts, and it does not belong to human nature to be omniscient, or to always judge as

well on the spur of the moment as when there is plenty of time to deliberate” (CSMK III 269; AT IV 307). Descartes recognizes what seems intuitively right about the nature of action, that it is often the case that agents must make snap judgments. Even in cases in which we have time to deliberate (which might be many cases in which we are making decisions about important things), we may still go wrong by virtue of the fact that we cannot have eyes everywhere, nor can we always be certain of all the future consequences of our actions which Fate / Providence has determined. Given these incontrovertible facts about the nature of action as well as ourselves and the nature of the world, agents should not regret their misdeeds, so long as they did their very best to judge well at the time they needed to act, and then carried out their chosen course of action(s) with constancy and resolve. Descartes’ justification for this view is fairly straightforward: praise or blame can only pertain to that which lies within our control which, for Descartes, is only our thoughts or desires. Actions are informed by our thoughts or desires from which we form judgments about what should or should not be done. Therefore, actions should be considered virtuous only in terms of whether or not they are approached with the right thoughts in mind, which amounts doing what “we judged best at the time when we had to decide to act” (CSMK III 269; AT IV 307).

§5 Conclusion

Descartes does not suggest that virtue requires that agents do *whatever* they deem to be the best course of action, and do it with gusto. In fact, Descartes has fairly stringent requirements for how we accustom ourselves to forming certain and determinate judgments in the first place. This formation involves a rigorous program of intellectual exercises including Cartesian Method and *Meditations*. Given God’s benevolence, which guarantees our intellectual faculties, and having properly applied our faculties of judgment, Cartesian agents should be fairly adept at identifying for themselves the right course of action, even if it is merely probable. It is, in fact, this confidence regarding the likelihood of our success that helps to habituate agents towards the virtue of resolve. In cases when we do have time to deliberate, however, which are often when the stakes are very high, acting with Cartesian resolve requires that we fully embrace our freedom *to determine for ourselves* what should or should not be done, that we meet only the highest standards for forming our judgment in the first place (and at all times throughout the course of action), and that we follow through with our decisions without being diverted or distracted by our passions. At times, we may be quite unsure about what to do, but need to act anyway. In these cases the best we can hope for is to act with determination and resolve on what we have discerned to be most probably the best course of action. Once a course of action is undertaken, we must stay the course that our reason recommends, even if it may cause us harm. We should not second-

guess ourselves, vacillate, nor argue over the details of a decision that has already been made. For not only might this slow us down, perhaps to the point of a full-stop, but such indecision will not necessarily affect the outcome of the action that has been undertaken and will earn us a reputation for being irresolute.

Irresoluteness is a serious character flaw because it discourages agents from being self-reliant. (Later Kant will regard this virtue in terms of autonomy.) Even when we are irresolute but do *good* deeds, we should repent our actions because their goodness did not originate in us. Cartesian resoluteness, or virtue, requires that we accustom ourselves to becoming self-reliant, which means that we apply our minds well and seek to discover for *ourselves* what should be done or avoided, which is Descartes' first moral maxim. Cartesian virtue presupposes that we correctly distinguish what is and is not within our control, which is Descartes' third moral maxim. Having formed the most perfect judgments possible, resolute agents should proceed with confidence in the realm of action without being diverted by their passions and appetites that can sometimes divert them from their chosen course of action, which involves Descartes' second moral maxim. This ethic of self-perfection is based in the view that as we rely more and more on our own judgments, we can better guard against the passions and develop more confidence in our ability to determine for ourselves a right course of action. There will still be cases in which we go wrong. But as long as we were resolute we should not regret the negative or harmful consequences of our actions, whether upon ourselves or others or both. We should not regret these misdeeds because it was not in our power to do anything but to act with resolve, which presupposes that we have met very highest standards for forming the judgment in question, that is, exerting our very best efforts towards being virtuous.

The only thing we need ever regret is having done less than our best. If misfortune still befalls us or our fellow creatures as the result of our resolute deeds, it does us little good to regret that which is out of our rational control: "Things without all remedy, Should be without regard: what's done, is done" (Shakespeare, *Macbeth* Act 4, scene 2). Descartes is certainly not alone in thinking that morality depends on effort—or a good will—and less on actual success.²² This early modern account of virtue anticipates the greatest ethicist of the Enlightenment.

Notes

¹ I am grateful to Shoshana Brassfield who guided my thinking on this point, (March 6, 2010). “Descartes and the Danger of Irresolution.” Unpublished paper presented at Descartes Day, Syracuse University, Syracuse, New York.

² I am using the term “Cartesian” to pertain only to the writings and works of Descartes, not necessarily subsequent thinkers who followed him.

³ CSMK III refers to John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, Dugald Murdoch, Anthony Kenny, trans. *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes: The Correspondence*, Vol. III (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991). CSM I and CSM II refer to John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, Dugald Murdoch, trans. *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes: Volumes I and II* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985 and 1984).

⁴ Note the CSM edition translates “*les repentirs*” as “remorse” (*les remords*) instead of “repentance.” I have altered that translation to repentance.

⁵ See for example, Daniel Statman’s work *Moral Luck* (Albany: 1993).

⁶ Descartes was undoubtedly influenced by the Stoics. Nicholas Rescher, in *Luck: The Brilliant Randomness of Everyday Life* (New York: 1995) explains that these philosophers insist that although we are not masters of our circumstances we are—or should be—masters of ourselves (p. 169). Descartes’ account of freedom and determinism may also be influenced by the Stoics, and draws on the important distinction between (i) acts that depend on and originate in the soul, and (ii) acts and behaviors that originate outside the soul from some other stimulus (Deborah Jean Brown, *Descartes and the Passionate Mind* (Cambridge: 2006), pp. 174-5). There are roots for Descartes’ view on these matters in Renaissance humanism; e.g., Poggio Bracciolini (1380-1459), “The strength of fortune is never so great that it will not be overcome by men who are steadfast and resolute” (Rescher, p. 87). In fact the 17th century in general was characterized by great faith in the power of reason and its ability to illumine and improve the human condition, which gave rise to thinkers (like Leibniz) who proposed a calculus of probability which they thought could manage chance (Rescher, p. 138). Descartes’ views on these and related matters may be considered forward-thinking to the extent that he may be viewed as a precursor to Kant who views the will as the only unconditional good thing, suggesting the morality depends on effort rather than success (Rescher, p. 162).

⁷ Various biographers comment on Descartes’ irresoluteness. Genevieve Rodis-Lewis (“Descartes’ Life and Development of His Philosophy” in the *Cambridge Companion to Philosophy* (Cambridge: 1992), pp. 21-57); Desmond Clark (*Descartes: A Biography* (Cambridge University Press: 2006), p. 85, 91. Richard Watson (*Ergo, Sum: The Life of Rene Descartes* (David R. Godine: 2002), p. 74.

⁸ Repentance is a “Christian virtue” that helps us to correct our faults – “not only those committed voluntarily, but also those done through ignorance, when some passion has prevented us from knowing the truth” (Letter to Elizabeth (3 November 1645), CSMK III 276; AT IV 331).

⁹ Descartes expresses regret in not having been able to see his father before his death. But he refuses to leave Leiden to attend his father's funeral, and instead stays to complete the publishing of the *Meditations*. “I very much regret not having been able to go to France this summer, to see him before he died. But because God did not allow this, I am resolved to stay here until my *Philosophy* is completed” (CSMK III 160, AT III 251-253).

¹⁰ In his *Optics*, Descartes refers to people who regret accidentally wounding someone when they are firing artillery pieces for fun (CSM I 160; AT VI 99).

¹¹ In “Moral Luck” (in Statman (1993), pp. 35-55), Bernard Williams describes “regret in general” as something like “how much better if it had been otherwise,” and specifies agent-regret as a species of regret that “a person can feel only towards his own past actions (or, at most, actions in which he regards himself as a participant)” (p. 42).

¹² Here Descartes has in mind desiring things outside his power to possess.

¹³ “In this sense the scholastics are right when they say that virtues are habits; for in fact our failings are rarely due to a lack of theoretical knowledge of what we should do, but to a lack of practical knowledge – that is, a firm habit of belief” (CSMK III 267; AT IV 296).

¹⁴ Note that the original French text reads, “*les repentirs*,” not “*les regrets*.”

¹⁵ This point was brought to my attention by Shoshana Brassfield, (March 6, 2010). “Descartes and the Danger of Irresolution.” Unpublished paper presented at Descartes Day, Syracuse University, Syracuse, New York.

¹⁶ The idea that absence of clear and distinct perception, resolution is necessary in order to determine the will is defended by Shoshana Brassfield, *Ibid.* See also Paul Hoffman (“The Passions and Freedom of Will.” *Passion and Virtue in Descartes*. Ed. Byron Williston and André Gombay. (Amherst, NY: 2003), pp. 261-299.

¹⁷ Likewise, in a letter written earlier in that same month, Descartes suggests the following. “...I don’t consider it necessary to have an exact knowledge of the truth on every topic, or even to have foreseen in detail all possible eventualities, which would doubtless be impossible. It is enough in general to have imagined circumstances more distressing than one’s own and to be prepared to bear them. Moreover, I do not think that one can sin by excess in desiring the necessities of life; it is only desires for evil or superfluous things that need controlling...To palliate my own faults I listed certain irresolution as an excusable passion, but nevertheless I esteem much more highly the diligence of those who are swift and ardent in performing what they conceive to be their duty even when they do not expect much profit from it” (CSMK III 287; AT IV 411).

¹⁸ For good discussions of Descartes’ moral philosophy, see Lisa Shapiro, ‘Descartes’s Ethics’ in *Blackwell Companion to Descartes*, Janet Broughton and John Carriero (eds). (Blackwell Publishing: 2008); Lisa

Shapiro, 'Cartesian Generosity', *Acta Philosophica Fennica*, vol. 64, 1999; Noa Naumann-Zauderer, *Descartes' Deontological Turn* (Cambridge: 2010); John Marshall, *Descartes's Moral Theory* (Cornell: 1998).

¹⁹ These rules or conditions are an updated version of the maxims of Descartes's "provisional morality" (CSM I 122-4; AT VI 22-7).

²⁰ See also letter to Chanut, 6 June 1647 (CSMK 322; AT V 54).

²¹ Likewise, in a (29 November 1647) letter to Queen Christina, Descartes writes that the "supreme good of each individual... consists only in a firm will to do well and the contentment which this produces" (CSM K III 325; AT V 83). "Just as all vices arise simply from the uncertainty and weakness that comes from ignorance and lead to regret, *so virtue consists only in the resolution and vigor* with which we are inclined to do the things we think good – this vigor, of course, must not stem from stubbornness, but from the *knowledge that we have examined the matters as well as we are morally able*. What we do after such examination may be bad, but none the less we can be sure of having done our duty; whereas, if we do a virtuous action thinking we are doing wrong, or take no trouble to find out whether we are doing right or wrong, we are not acting like a virtuous person...nothing expect virtue really deserves praise...For honor and praise is a kind of reward, and only what depends on [the good use of free] will provide grounds for reward or punishment" (CSMK III 325; AT V 83-84). (Emphasis added.)

²² See Rescher, p. 162.